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Smart cities and dull lives

Bonani & Pradeep Kakkar



Sitting in Calcutta, a city that has been gasping under the onslaught of blue-and-white beautification (some call it "blutocracy"), it would be a well-deserved relief if we are not among the chosen set of cities identified for transformation to smartness. One hundred of them, categorized by size, location, historical and tourist significance and other parameters, are to be assured water, electricity, health and education facilities, "robust" transport systems, security and job opportunities. Somewhat like mirages in the deserts of the Middle East, these cities are expected to emerge from the pollution, squalor and chaos of what we know as urban India and give us the lives that we have been yearning for - clean, organized and efficient. The subtext says that we will wrest our India back from all those wasteful rural development schemes and hot focus on the future - our cities.

To be sure, a focus on cities is needed. By 2030, about 600 million Indians - almost twice the population of the United States - will be living in cities. Around the globe, that same year, 5 billion people, about 60 per cent of the world's population, will be city dwellers. Another two decades after that, by 2050, 90 per cent of global population growth, 80 per cent of wealth creation and 60 per cent of total energy creation will be in cities. Improving life in cities, therefore, is the inescapable imperative of the 21st century.



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The "smart city" approach relies heavily on the creation of new cities, or satellites around existing cities, using information and communication technology as the force multiplier. ICT is the tool that will enable "structured and hospitable living conditions" to be provided to the residents. Problems such as traffic congestion, energy wastage, water conservation and security will be dealt with through a centralized system receiving real-time inputs and optimizing service availability for the prevalent demand and utilization patterns. In a word, it will be the wired version of utopia, a smoothly functioning city that will allow its residents to enjoy the benefits of a hassle-free, rich social, cultural and political life.

It does get seductive when you look at plans for individual cities. Take, for instance, the ancient Gujarat port city of Dholera, about 100 km from Ahmedabad, chosen to be smartened because of its location along the Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor. This tiny farming community of 4,500 people is to be transformed to a new city of 2 million spread over 920 sq km of industrial, commercial and residential areas. A 185 km 6-lane highway is visualized, linking Dholera to the DMIC, along with an airport and a state-of-the-art port. And, of course, there is to be centralized digital control of all utilities such as water, power and gas through an underground sensor system reporting to a central control room. The first brick is to be laid in a year and the city will be completed over three decades. Curiously, the project has already been recommended for environmental clearance by the expert appraisal committee of the central ministry of environment and forests, while clearance has not yet been given by the state coastal regulation zone authority. There is also a legal challenge posed by some of the residents of the 22 affected villages.

Similar cityhood is to be conferred on the two settlements of Shendra and Bidkin, near Aurangabad, which are to be conjoined into one smart city. While Shendra has been languishing as an industrial township since the 1990s, Bidkin, a village of 20,000 people founded by a Sufi saint in the 14th century, has probably been quite content with its one post office, one police station and one bank. But no longer. The Shendra-Bidkin smart city is visualized as a 40 sq km "activation zone" that will receive the benefit of a US company's planning wisdom and a Japanese consortium's assistance for "trunk infrastructure." Rs 3,000 crore has been allocated for this year alone and ambitious exhibition and convention centres are being planned as land is being acquired.

But for all the buzz around smartness and investments, there is little being said about outcomes; indeed, there is something discomfoting about the equation of smartness and technology with liveability. Does quality of life in a city flow from its efficiency? Not entirely so, say experience and data. Much-maligned Calcutta has been an enigma in that it has fostered deep loyalty and pride despite its "nothing works" status. Even those who have had to leave the city for lack of economic opportunity keep referring to Calcutta as the "only real city in India". So, what is it that gives Calcutta this adhesive quality, despite its apparent unsmartness?

An insight, though from a foreign setting, comes from a 2010 study conducted by Gallup on 43,000 respondents. The broad purpose of the survey was to find out why people love where they live, the reasons for their sense of attachment to their place of residence.

The study identified three drivers: *openness* (how welcoming and tolerant the city is to different people), social offerings (what opportunities the city offers for people to meet and interact with one another), and *aesthetics*, which are the features in the city that make it pleasant and pretty. The study was conducted across 26 cities in the US and the three drivers showed up consistently across the cities. While economic opportunity did not show up as a major driver of attachment, the authors point out that attachment leading to greater engagement with the city does create economic momentum.

The conclusions of this "soul of the community" research tie in well with established wisdom in urban planning. Talent, technology and tolerance are what make a city throb and thrive. Edward Glaeser at Harvard stresses human energy - all successful cities, according to him, "attract smart people and enable them to work collaboratively". Several writers have stressed the importance of neighbourhoods. Having learned from the errors of the automobile-dependant rush to suburbia, city planners in the West are opting for a flexible approach to land use, so that communities can retain their local character and yet create opportunities for economic growth. As Calcutta's *paras* wrestle with the transformation from being pure residential localities to more mixed use, there is hope that boutique businesses based on the city's talent and inclusiveness will emerge as a driver.

The key message for the enthusiast of the smart city is that technology should certainly be used to improve the functioning of our cities but with a caveat. The application of technology should follow an understanding of the soul of the community that is intended to be 'smartened' rather than be allowed to become an end in itself. The cold sterility and non-humanness of our achievements at Gurgaon and Rajarhat remind us that liveable cities need to be made of flesh, not steel and glass. Technology's role will be vital as an enabler, but cities will be liveable ultimately because of how they nurture and encourage their communities.

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